

PLASMA CATALYTIC FUEL INJECTOR FOR ENHANCED COMBUSTION

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PLASMA CATALYTIC FUEL INJECTOR FOR ENHANCED COMBUSTION

10 The present invention generally relates to combustion processes, and,
more specifically, to processes that enhance the efficiency of combustion
processes. This invention was made with Government support under Contract
No. W-7405-ENG-36 awarded by the U.S. Department of Energy. The
Government has certain rights in the invention.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

15 Combustion processes are involved in many aspects of modern life, and
are, in large part, responsible for our current standard of living. Combustion
provides the propulsion of our automobiles and airplanes, generates virtually all
our electrical power, heats most of our homes and buildings, and provides much
of our hot water. In this age of increasing energy costs, it is vitally important to
20 assure that these combustion processes are carried out in the most efficient way
possible, and to assure that fuel is conserved and that pollution is reduced.

All combustion processes involve the breakdown of the fuel being burned
into free radicals and other reactive species. It is this breakdown into reactive
species that initiates a combustion process. In many applications, a spark plug
25 produces a momentary high voltage spark discharge that breaks down an air/fuel
mixture into the requisite free radical/ion reactive species so that combination
with oxygen and/or fuel can occur. Combustion then continues by the
propagation of the reactive species generated by the heat of the reaction itself.

Thus, the overall combustion reaction rate usually is determined by the
30 efficiency of generation of the new reactive species in the spreading flame front.
As the reaction rate and temperature of the combustion process are increased, a
related increase in detonations and pressure will occur.

Since the efficiency of combustion processes largely is determined by
usual thermodynamic considerations, namely, the higher the temperature, the
35 more thorough and efficient the combustion process becomes, and the greater
the energy that can be extracted -and the higher the Carnot efficiency. This is

5 the reason behind the thrust of engine makers, either of internal combustion engines or jet engines, to seek ever-higher temperature combustion processes. However, this increase in temperature places increasing demands on material scientists to provide materials that can withstand such high temperatures.

The objects, advantages and novel features of the invention will be set
10 forth in part in the description which follows, and in part will become apparent to those skilled in the art upon examination of the following or may be learned by practice of the invention. The objects and advantages of the invention may be realized and attained by means of the instrumentalities and combinations particularly pointed out in the appended claims.

15 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the objects and purposes of the present invention, as embodied and broadly described herein, apparatus for enhancing combustion comprises an enclosure defining an opening for introduction of a gas and openings for the introduction of air, with a nozzle in the opening for introduction
20 of a fuel gas into the enclosure. First and second electrodes are located in the enclosure, the first and second electrodes being coated with dielectric material and being connected to an electrical power supply. Wherein, with electrical power applied to the first and second electrodes and with fuel gas sprayed into the enclosure, an atmospheric pressure plasma created by a dielectric barrier
25 discharge is produced in the enclosure that cracks the fuel gas prior to its mixing with air introduced through the openings for the introduction of air.

In another aspect of the present invention, and in accordance with its purposes and objects, a method of increasing the efficiency of combustion processes comprises the steps of producing an atmospheric pressure plasma
30 created by dielectric barrier discharge; and spraying a fuel gas into the atmospheric pressure plasma; wherein the atmospheric pressure plasma cracks the fuel gas.

5 In still another aspect of the present invention and in accordance with its purposes and objectives, apparatus for enhancing combustion comprises separate supplies of fuel and air, with valve means for controlling the flow of fuel and air. Plasma processing means receive the fuel and air for selectively pre-cracking the fuel and exciting the air and outputting the pre-cracked fuel and
10 excited air to a combustor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and forms a part of the specification, illustrate embodiments of the present invention and, together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. In the
15 drawings:

FIGURE 1 is an illustration of an embodiment of the present invention in which an atmospheric pressure plasma is used to crack the fuel.

FIGURE 2 is an illustration of an embodiment of the present invention in which a combination of a plasma and heated electrodes are used to crack the
20 fuel.

FIGURE 3 is an illustration of an embodiment of the present invention in which valves and individual plasma units are used to show some of the various ways that a plasma treatment could be applied to the combustion process.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

25 The present invention converts liquid or gaseous fuels into reactive species on a continuous basis, so that the combustion process does not rely solely on the self-generation of reactive species. The understanding of the invention can be aided through reference to the drawings.

30 In Figure 1, a schematical illustration of one embodiment of the invention is shown where fuel gas 11 is introduced into volume 12 through fuel nozzle 11a. If fuel gas 11 is initially in liquid form, such as all hydrocarbon fuels, oxygenated hydrocarbon fuels and other functionalized fuels, fuel oils, diesel fuels, kerosene fuels including usual jet fuels such as Jet A, Jet B, JP-10, crude oil, and

5 kerosene, it is atomized in the manner of conventional fuel injectors before being introduced into volume 12. If the fuel gas 11 is a gas, such as propane, natural gas, butane, propene, pure methane, ethylene, ethane and related fuels, it is passed directly through nozzle 11a to meter the flow. The present invention can use essentially any liquid or gas that burns as fuel gas 11.

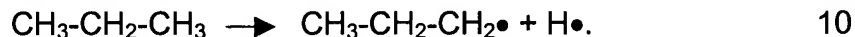
10 Because the present invention can accommodate both liquid and gaseous fuels it useful in virtually all present combustion processes. In some circumstances, it will be beneficial to heat fuel gas 11 before it is passed through nozzle 11a to achieve an even higher level of enhancement.

Electrical power unit 13 produces a voltage at electrodes 13a and 13b
15 inside volume 12. Each of electrodes 13a, 13b is coated with dielectric material 13c. The voltage at electrodes 13a, 13b produces an atmospheric pressure plasma created by dielectric barrier discharge in volume 12 that cracks fuel gas 11 into reactive species 14. Reactive species 14, now a highly reactive cracked fuel, is exhausted through volume 12 until it is mixed with air 15 incoming through
20 ports 12a and combusts into flame front 16. Further ignition may not be needed as reactive species 14 are predisposed to immediate reaction with oxygen. Hence, this embodiment of the invention can serve as an ignition initiator device. To further enhance the cracking process, electrodes 13a, 13b could be coated with a dielectric material that has a catalytic material deposited at predetermined
25 non-contiguous areas.

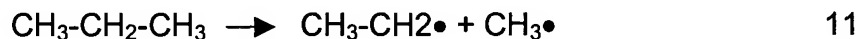
Electrical power unit 13 can supply a range of voltages to electrodes 13a, 13b. In a one embodiment, electrical power supply 13 provides a radio frequency voltage having a frequency of 13.56 MHz. Other possible outputs of electrical power supply 13 include pulsed direct current, alternating currents from
30 low frequencies to radio frequency and even microwave. Each will be capable of creating the atmospheric pressure plasma created by a dielectric barrier discharge.

Fuel gas 11, whether atomized or gaseous, is cracked by passing through the atmospheric pressure plasma region in volume 12 in a process that can be

- 5 adjusted to produce any desired level of molecular breakdown. For example, in the case of propane, the cracking could be limited to just cleaving hydrogen as shown in the following reaction:



- Should it be desired to cleave methylene fragments or carbene structures, the
10 following reactions would occur:



- Another embodiment of the invention is illustrated schematically in Figure 2. In this embodiment, which is similar to that shown in Figure 1, electrical power
15 unit 13 is connected to electrodes 21a, 21b, which may be fabricated from any metallic materials, and which are coated with a dielectric material having, in one embodiment, known transition elements, such as platinum, or alloys made of combinations of transition elements, deposited at predetermined non-contiguous areas. To achieve similar results, a catalyst such as platinum or other transition
20 element, could be suspended inside volume 12. Electrodes 21a, 21b also can be resistance heated by power sources 22, 23 to add thermal deposition to the cracking reactions to further accelerate the cleavage reactions.

- Experiments using a configuration as shown in Figure 1 have shown the benefits of plasma-enhanced combustion. Propane was combusted in a coaxial
25 tube with an atmospheric pressure plasma present showed significant differences when compared to combustion with the plasma not present. Among these differences are (1) an enhanced flame front 16 (Figure 1) that was more stable and less prone to "blow out;" (2) the physical character of flame front 16 was visually different; (3) and, most importantly, residual unburned propane was
30 measurably reduced as shown by mass spectrometry. The amount of efficiency enhancement is still under investigation and optimization of the propane combustion process is progressing. In unoptimized experiments with activated propane mixed with air, an increase in propane utilization of approximately 88% was observed, with a concomitant increase of carbon dioxide and water

- 5 production (indicators of better combustion) of approximately 130% and 67%, respectively, was observed.

Another embodiment of the invention that may provide improved pollutant emission performance and excellent control is illustrated in schematic form in Figure 3. Here, fuel supply 31 provides fuel as previously described to valves 32, 33, and 34. Air supply 36 provides air to valves 37, 38, and 39. With valves 32 and 37 open, fuel and air can mix in T-connection 35 and be provided to combustor 40 if valve 41 is open. This would be for conventional combustion. Alternatively, if only valves 34 and 39 are open, fuel and air would separately be provided to combustor 40.

15 However, to achieve the benefits of the present invention, valves 34, 39, and 41 would be closed and valves 32, 37, and 42 opened. In this arrangement, the mixed fuel and air flows through plasma unit 42 where fuel is cracked and air is excited, in a process previously described, before entering combustor 40. However, there is no present evidence indicating that subjecting the fuel-air mixture is superior to using the plasma to crack only the fuel prior to its mixing with air. If desired, the fuel and air could separately pass through plasma units 44 and 45 respectively if valves 33 and 38 are open and all other valves closed. According to the desired effect, any or all of the valves may be partly open with some of the fuel, the air, or a mixture of both undergoes treatment by the plasma.

25 From Figure 3, it is easy to understand how this embodiment of the present invention can provide the most efficient operation of combustor 40. Configurations ranging from no plasma pre-cracking to complete plasma pre-cracking of any stream of air and/or fuel can be easily obtained through control of the valves.

30 The foregoing description of the embodiments of the invention has been presented for purposes of illustration and description. It is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed, and obviously many modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teaching. The embodiments were chosen and described in order to best explain the

- 5 principles of the invention and its practical application to thereby enable others skilled in the art to best utilize the invention in various embodiments and with various modifications as are suited to the particular use contemplated. It is intended that the scope of the invention be defined by the claims appended hereto.